

# Oh My Darling

William Griffith

THE HUGE BLACK cigar smelled horrible. The fat man who was smoking it, however, seemed to enjoy it a great deal. He chewed on it, putting it first in one corner of his mouth, then in the other. Clem watched him out of the corner of her eye. She was fascinated and disgusted by his appearance. His face was round and red. From it stuck a huge bulbous nose with tiny purple veins and red welts. The eyes were mere moist slits with a thin line of eyebrow above. The lips were large and purple. Once he smiled at her, and she saw the brown stubs of broken teeth. Sweat poured from his face and dropped onto his untidy brown suit. Clem could smell him and could feel him against her. Although she sat as close to the window as was possible, she could not get far enough away from him on the narrow seat. She was, therefore, uncomfortable. She pressed her forehead against the window and watched the trees and telephone poles flash by in neat rows.

With her hands she carefully held a small pastry box on her lap. She occasionally glanced at it and fondled it, pulling the white cord with which it was tied and tracing a long thin finger over the blue letters that spelled out Hergeshiemer's Pastries. A little bake-shop man was pictured on the pastry box in blue and pink. He held a huge blue ladle in his hands from which was dripping what appeared to be a rich and creamy icing. Clem smiled unconsciously as she carefully ran her hand over the little box.

"Hey, kid, ain't this where you wanted off?" the bus driver yelled back through the bus. Clem looked up: the bus had stopped and outside was the bridge. The driver was waiting.

"Yes, this is it. Just a minute," she called as she squeezed past the plump knees of the fat man.. "Bye, Honey," he mouthed at her. She ignored this and walked to the door at the front. Passengers looked at her with listless eyes. A little boy sniggered at her. A boy sitting on the front seat whistled as she stepped off the bus, then smugly laughed.

"Thanks," she said to the driver.

"Yeah, kid; you're welcome," he called over his shoulder. The door closed and the red and yellow bus moved away. The fat man

waved to her from the small square window. She turned and crossed the cement bridge.

Although the air was still hot, she could smell no vile cigar. She smelled the damp grass, the scum at the edge of the water, the hay in the field, and the dust of the road. The leaves on the trees had a brown film of dust on them which intensified the heat that was everywhere. The sun shone down from a paleness of blue warmth and oppressive hot air. The rippling of the stream below gave the only impression of coolness in the monotonous landscape of tree and field and road that surrounded her. So, carefully holding the pastry box, Clem descended the slope to the water's edge and followed the path there that went with the stream into the wood.

The grass was wet, and soon her sneakers and feet were also wet. But she enjoyed this, and shook her hair back from her face as she walked. Once she stopped and picked one of the small daisies that grew in such profusion here in the shade. She looked at it carefully, examined it, smiled at it. She noted the white, uneven petals with tiny rills, the cushion-like center of peculiar brown, the green sepals, the fuzzy stem, and the slender green leaves. She held it against her cheek, and then threw it into the water and watched it floating so smoothly down the stream.

She reached a place where the stream broadened and formed a pool. At both ends of the pool were shoals where the water rippled and splashed over pebbles and rocks. Large sycamore trees grew around the pool and created a wall and screen through which little sunlight penetrated. But golden flecks appeared here and there, shimmering on the water and quivering on the soft grass that grew right to the edge of the pool. Besides the noise of the water, a buzzing of bees near the daisies and primroses that grew around the mighty trunks reached Clem's ears.

She set the pastry box between the roots of a tree and sat down on a fallen log that stuck one shattered end into the water. She unbuttoned her white shirt and threw it on the log. She untied her sneakers and pushed them off, leaving them where they fell. Standing up, she unbuttoned and slipped out of her faded blue-jeans. These landed on top of the shirt. Her cotton pants landed on top the blue-jeans. Thus ready she ran and dived into the clear, cool water of the pool.

She swam for half an hour or more, splashing, laughing, and thoroughly enjoying herself. Once while floating, she watched her body in the water; it was long and thin. She had hardly any breasts to speak of, and her arms were thin, with hands small and narrow. Her legs too were long and thin. She had at one time wished for a small beautiful body, but now it did not matter to her. She was alone and she was happy. It seemed as if her moments of greatest happiness came when she was alone.



She came out of the water and sat down on the log. Shivering, she waited for her body to dry before getting into her clothes. She reached for her shirt and took out a package of cigarettes and a box of matches. She lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. The smoke, filling her lungs, felt good; she exhaled slowly and watched the smoke disseminate in the still air.

As she finished dressing, Clem saw a small boy come from behind one of the towering sycamores. Her mouth fell open.

"Who in the hell are you?" she finally got out.

"Oh, I'm Aaron and I live over there," the boy said pointing aimlessly in no particular direction. "I was watching you."

"You were, were you!" Clem stated. She was half angry, half amused. "That's nice!"

Aaron looked earnestly at her. He had big brown eyes that grew larger as he stared at her. His hair was curly and brown, his face round and pleasant. Clem liked the kid; he was kind of nice looking for a kid. He had on short pants, and his legs were well formed. His whole body was lovely and beautiful. He will be quite a looker when he grows older, she thought.

"How old are you?" he asked.

"Fourteen," she answered after a pause. "Why?"

"I just wanted to know. I have a sister and she is fifteen, but she is prettier than you. She isn't so tall or so thin, but I don't like her." He continued to look at her. "I think that I like you."

"Well, thanks," Clem muttered rather self-consciously. "How old are you?"

"Oh, I'm ten, but I'm small for my age," said Aaron.

Clem took a comb from her shirt pocket and combed her hair. She parted it in the middle and began to plait it.

"May I help? I know how to braid; my sister taught me. May I?" begged Aaron.

"Yeah, sure," said Clem. "Come on."

He took the damp hair in his hand, working slowly and carefully. Clem put a small red rubber band around her completed plait and waited for him to finish. She could feel his soft breathing upon her neck. It made her feel strange, and she shifted her body.

"Did I hurt you?" Aaron asked.

"No," she answered.

He was finally finished. "There," he said. "Have you another rubber band?"

"Yes, here," and she gave him another from her pocket.

Aaron stood back to examine their work. Her hair was short and lank. The braids stuck out from her head at rather peculiar angles. The face he saw was plain, but comely; freckles gathered about the long thin nose, and the lips were narrow without shapely lines. Her

eyes were pale blue. In her left eye was a small golden fleck. He smiled at her and she smiled back.

"What is your name?"

"Clem."

"Gosh, what a funny name for a girl!"

"My real name is Clementine, but everyone calls me Clem. I don't like Clementine; do you?"

"No," he said and laughed. Clem laughed with him.

They talked together for some time. Then Clem remembered the little pastry box; she bent down and picked it up. "Are you hungry?" she asked. "I am."

"Golly is it that late! I'd better go. Mother'll be waiting lunch for me," Aaron cried nervously. "I'm afraid I'll have to go, Clem."

"Aw, that's too bad." Clem was sorry. She wanted to reach out and touch him before he left.

"I will meet you here again, won't I? Maybe next week?" he asked.

"Sure, I'll be here next week. I'll see you then," she replied.

"Well . . . goodbye then," Aaron called as he walked away from her.

"Goodby, Aaron," and he was gone between the tall sycamores.

Clem sat silent for a few minutes, then untied the pastry box and ate her lunch alone. After she had eaten, she set the pastry box on the ground and set it afire with the match she was using to light her cigarette. The little box burned brightly and gave off hardly any smoke. The ash remained whole: a curling grey box with dark lines forming the bake-shop man with his great ladle dripping rich and creamy icing. Clem flipped the cigarette onto the water and stepped on the grey ash. Small bits twirled around her sneakers and fell on the green grass, crumbling into nothing.

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## The Ring

Patty Lewis

EDWINA MARKHAM gazed around her apartment with obvious satisfaction. The room was painfully clean, and she observed rather smugly that each piece of her treasured furniture fully showed the care lavished upon it. She had polished her mother's silver service just that morning, and her cherished collection of antique figurines was ever artfully displayed behind the glass doors of two small cabinets. Even the white and grey cat, sprawled peacefully on her special cushion, in no way disturbed the prim atmosphere of the room.